Adoption of Aspiration Feature in Sino-Korean Phonology

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Sino-Korean (SK) is a phonological system of Chinese-character readings derived from Middle Chinese (MC). A few phonological features of Middle Chinese have been adopted irregularly into SK. SK readings with aspiration discrepancy are part of this broader phenomenon of irregular SK readings.

It is widely assumed that both Chinese and Korean had voiceless aspirated stops and voiceless unaspirated stops at the time when Chinese characters were adopted in Korea. Therefore, in most cases, a regular correspondence between MC and SK is observed with these two types of stops. However, there are still many cases where the aspiration feature shows irregular correspondence. Some SK readings whose MC counterpart has an unaspirated initial have an aspirated initial, while some SK readings with an aspirated initial in their MC counterpart have an unaspirated initial. For example, 八 MC paːt ‘eight’ with initial bānmǔ 帮母 (p) has an aspirated labial initial in its SK reading pʰal.

Some research studies have attempted to identify factors that influence the aspiration feature in SK using data from various eonhae 諺解 (Korean annotations of Chinese texts) and Korean Chinese-character rhyme books (Kōno, 1968; Itō, 2007). They explain SK aspiration discrepancies using hypotheses such as analogy of the characters’ phonetic components and ‘syllabic inclination’. A large portion of Chinese characters are of the type called xíngshēng 形聲 with a phonetic component and a semantic component. Because Chinese pronunciations were borrowed into Korean in tandem with written Chinese characters, orthographic interference had a more significant influence compared to most other scenarios of loanword adaptation. According to the hypothesis, the influence of the phonetic component of a character can interfere with the expected SK aspiration feature.

Onsetsu henkō 音節偏向, which we can translate as “syllabic inclination,” is a term Kōno uses to label a phenomenon in which there are certain syllable types that can combine only with aspirated initials or only with unaspirated initials. For example, there are characters whose SK reading is pin, but the final -in does not occur with an aspirated labial initial ph-. According to the hypothesis, syllabic inclination prevents phin from existing as an SK reading, so that expected phin is realized instead as pin.

I will discuss problems with these two hypotheses and suggest an improved account of the causes of aspiration mismatch. A theory of hyper-adaptation will be discussed as one important factor. In hyper-adaptation, which encompasses hyper-foreignization and hypercorrection, speakers of one speech form extend a pattern or structural element based on what they perceive as appropriate for another speech form, even though these extensions are not necessarily justified historically or etymologically (Trudgill 1986). I will examine a hypothesis that hyper-foreignization and hypercorrection played a role in creating irregular Sino-Korean pronunciations, and explore possible connections to the phenomenon of syllabic inclination.